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SUBJECT: DIYARBAKIR'S DEHAP MAYOR BURNS BRIDGES WITH CONDOLENCE VISIT TO PKK MILITANT'S FAMILY

11. (SBU) Summary: After a nine-day security operation and killing of two alleged PKK/Kongra-Gel members reportedly involved in a deadly July 28 attack on a Diyarbakir police station, greater Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir (DEHAP) paid a condolence visit to the family of one of the alleged PKK members. The Diyarbakir Governor's Office subsequently requested an investigation of Baydemir and four local mayors for that visit, citing among other things the Mayor's improper use of an official vehicle. In August 11 meetings, DPO relayed to Baydemir strong U.S. disapproval of his action, and extended condolences on the death of the security guard in the July 28 attack to Diyarbakir's Deputy Governor and Security Director. Several human rights contacts in Diyarbakir privately called Baydemir's condolence visit a mistake, and despite their optimism about human rights developments in recent years, all are concerned about backsliding on the GOT's implementation of human rights reforms in the region in the wake of the PKK's June 2004 abandonment of its ceasefire and the tension it has created between the people and security forces in the region. End summary.

12. (U) On July 28, a PKK/Kongra-Gel attack against a police station in the Mardinkapi neighborhood of Diyarbakir resulted in the death of one security guard and the wounding of two other security officers. The Diyarbakir security directorate subsequently launched a nine-day operation to apprehend PKK militants who had fled the scene and taken refuge in a wooded area just outside the city known as Hevsel Gardens. During the operation, citizens living within the area of the dragnet were reportedly blocked from leaving, and non-security personnel were prevented from entering the area. According to Turkish officials, the operation netted two PKK militants and three individuals charged with abetting the PKK.

The Official View of Events in Mardinkapi

13. (SBU) Diyarbakir Deputy Governor told DPO on August 12 that the July 28 attack had been perpetrated against a police station some 300-400 meters away from a music festival that had been organized that evening. He claimed that the grenades launched at the police had come out of the festival. He confirmed that one security officer was killed in the attack and that at least three others were wounded (Note: In addition to two security officers, the wounded included the Deputy Mayor of Sur Municipality. End note.) While outlining the operation on a map, he explained to DPO that forces had surrounded a wooded area, used thermal cameras in their search for the perpetrators of the attack, and arrested two persons the morning following the attack. The brother of one of the militants was also arrested and provided information; two others were arrested for providing shelter for the militants. Despite these five arrests, two militants involved in the attack had escaped, he said, and for nine days the government called for their surrender. A group of forces organized to comb the area came upon them and engaged them in a firefight; the two armed PKK members were killed, according to the Deputy Governor, and their fingerprints supposedly confirmed involvement in the attack on the police station. (Note: there was no additional information provided on how this confirmation was made. End note.)

14. (U) On August 9, Turkish dailies reported that Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir (DEHAP) along with mayors of four smaller townships had paid a condolence visit to the family of one of the PKK members who had fled the attack scene and been killed in the operation. The Diyarbakir Governor's Office responded to the visit of Baydemir and the other mayors by requesting an investigation of the five DEHAP politicians for their action, citing among other things their improper use of official vehicles for the visit. The Interior Ministry has also been called upon to investigate the case.

The Mayor Makes His Case

15. (SBU) During a trip that had been scheduled before news of Baydemir's visit to the PKK member's family had surfaced, DPO met with the mayor on August 11 to inform him of our strong disapproval of his action, and to reiterate that the U.S. considers the PKK a terrorist organization and opposes any action that appears to support the PKK, especially this case where a security officer was killed.

16. (SBU) Baydemir told DPO that he learned about the Mardinkapi incident while participating on a television program. He stressed that under normal circumstances he would have been attending the festival that had been organized that evening for local singers and that it was only the previous TV engagement that prevented him from going. This is significant, he said, because five or six minutes before the explosion at the police station cars carrying other local mayors had passed by it. There was a lot of activity on the road in the vicinity of the police checkpoint that evening, and he questioned "who was really targeted in that attack."

17. (SBU) After receiving news of the attack, Baydemir claims he went to the hospital and visited the wounded security officials, expressing his concern. He stayed for approximately one hour, he said, along with other government officials. He claims the family of the guard was there, and he told them he shared in their suffering. He also visited the municipal official who had been wounded. As he exited the hospital, he told DPO, members of the press were present and he told them while he didn't have all the information about the incident, he was against all attacks and did not want blood to be shed. (Note: Press accounts have contradicted his account of the guard's family members being present. End note.)

18. (SBU) Baydemir together with several other local officials had plans to travel the following day (July 29) to Tunceli for a cultural festival. The night of July 28 he asked government officials if he should stay out at the hospital and in Diyarbakir out of courtesy, and they responded that there was no need to stay. He went to Tunceli as planned the following day and upon his return two days later he found "great tension," especially at the area of the operation. Baydemir stated that he received numerous complaints from citizens inside the area affected by the operation about such things as food shortages, health problems, and the effect the operation was having upon children. He met with the Diyarbakir Governor in an unsuccessful attempt to gain access for himself and NGO representatives to the scene of the operation. "Normally I should be getting information about such operations from the Security Directorate," he said, underlining that they were requesting access to a civilian area. After being denied access by security officials, he claims he spoke with the Minister of the Interior, who had been supportive.

19. (SBU) After the operation was concluded and news of the "extrajudicial killing" got out, he said, Baydemir expressed his condolences in a visit to the PKK member's family and shared their grief, asking that this be the final victim. "It's our tradition," he said; "If you don't do such a thing you'll be ashamed. Crime is an individual thing; it does not belong to the family." Baydemir ended his lengthy defense by underlining his view that the violence must stop unconditionally. "I could have been killed that night," he pleaded, "how could you think I support that?" He stressed that it is difficult to work on the underlying problems of poverty and unemployment in a poor security environment. Turkey has shown its preference for the EU, he said, and substantial development is taking place in democracy.

11. (SBU) DPO relayed to Baydemir that: the U.S. government considers the PKK a terrorist organization and PKK members terrorists; the EU has also listed the PKK as a terrorist organization; and that terror is not a legitimate way to work for political, social, economic or cultural rights. DPO informed Baydemir that we oppose any action that even appears to support the PKK, especially in the killing of a security officer. Regardless of his intentions, his visit gave that appearance, DPO continued, adding that such actions foster anger, suspicion and tension, not reconciliation. Baydemir maintained until the end of the meeting that he was "at peace with his conscience."

Security Director: "All Diyarbakir NGOs tied to PKK"

12. (SBU) Hours after meeting Mayor Baydemir, DPO called on Diyarbakir Security Director Orhan Okur and presented a wreath and condolences on the loss of a member of the security personnel in the July 28 attack. DPO reiterated the USG position that the PKK is a terrorist organization and told Okur of the call on Baydemir, adding that the visit had been used to convey a message of strong disapproval for Baydemir's action.

13. (SBU) Rather than dwelling on the Mardinkapi incident and the Mayor's controversial visit, Okur - using European Court of Human Rights publications and internet postings by human rights groups as visual aids - proceeded to lecture DPO about the misinformation campaign being waged by NGOs against the government. "We know Article 17 very well," he said, "It prohibits us from violating and limiting rights - don't worry about our taking care of human rights." But all NGOs in town have ties with the PKK, he argued, and he produced two examples where NGO reports alleging misdeeds by security forces were

eventually proved wrong. Such reports help the PKK and their recruitment efforts he said, and are not results of a lack of professionalism, but the product of ill-intentioned individuals.

14. (SBU) Comment: With this visit, Baydemir overstepped the parameters of GOT tolerance for pro-Kurdish activities in the Southeast, which have expanded in the past two years. Even contacts at both Diyarbakir's activist pro-Kurdish Bar Association and in local private business agreed, and said they had told the Mayor as much. Baydemir's actions have dimmed any potentially positive effect that he might have been able to have as a bridge between the Kurdish community and government officials, especially given attitudes such as that displayed by Security Director Okur and shared by many other officials.

15. (SBU) Comment, cont'd: Regardless of whether or not the charges against him move forward, the press seems intent on keeping this issue alive and Baydemir has given them ample fuel for the fire. August 16 media reports point to a June 2004 incident in which Baydemir allegedly dispatched a municipal ambulance to retrieve the corpse of a PKK militant after his May 28 shooting and subsequent death in Adana, bringing the body back to Diyarbakir for the burial ceremony. Such acts, even without the use of official vehicles, at best show poor judgment and at worst provide comfort and support to a terrorist organization. Contacts ranging from leftist Kurdish human rights activists to wealthy local businessmen agreed that the past 5 years had felt like "detente" and that the human rights situation had improved in very important ways (septel). All are now concerned about backsliding on the GOT's implementation of human rights reforms in the region in the wake of the PKK's abandonment of its five-year ceasefire and increasing tension between the public and security forces about how security forces are responding. In this context Baydemir's apparent indulgence of the PKK/Kongra-Gel is all the more ill-conceived and potentially inflammatory. Baydemir's actions are also a discouraging reminder that DEHAP and other regional political leaders in the Southeast have not yet found the will to break with the PKK.

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